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## Practical Theology in the Academy: A Contemporary Overview

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# Practical Theology in the Academy: A Contemporary Overview

*Gijsbert D. J. Dingemans* / *Groningen, the Netherlands*

In the past, practical theology was mainly a means for educating ministers for leadership in the church, and so, in many countries, it was taught in seminaries or church faculties. In Europe the main accent was placed on the general theological and cultural education of pastors (*Bildung*) rather than on skill training. Since practical theology was formally introduced into the academic curriculum at the end of the eighteenth century, Schleiermacher, one of the founders of the discipline, in his book *Brief Outline of the Study of Theology*,<sup>1</sup> divided theology into three fields: philosophical theology, being the roots of the theological tree; historical theology, the stem or body of the tree; and practical theology, which addresses the practice of the leadership of the church, the crown of the theological tree. Practical theology he considered to be a collection of *Kunstregeln*,<sup>2</sup> a *technē* (technique),<sup>3</sup> an applied discipline (*abgeleitete und angewandte Wissenschaft*). That means that in Europe the field of practical theology was for more than two centuries limited to the work and spiritual leadership of ministers in the church and that the academic status of this discipline

<sup>1</sup> Friedrich Schleiermacher, *Kurze Darstellung des theologischen Studiums* (Berlin, 1811); English translation, *Brief Outline of Theology as a Field of Study*, trans. Terrence N. Tice (Richmond, Va.: John Knox, 1966). Compare John E. Burkhart, "Schleiermacher's Vision for Theology," in *Practical Theology: The Emerging Field in Theology, Church and World*, ed. Don S. Browning (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1983), pp. 42–57.

<sup>2</sup> *Kurze Darstellung*, § 265. "Kunstregeln" are not "artificial rules" or even "tricks," but the "rules that count in understanding art."

<sup>3</sup> "Diese Regeln sind nicht formal als Mittel zu verstehen, sondern als Methoden, da Mittel und Zweck nicht zu trennen sind. Technik hat hier also nicht den instrumentalistischen Sinn, der den modernen Begriff von Technik auszeichnet. Technik ist vielmehr, in der Tradition des antiken Begriffs der *technē*, verstanden als Kunst, als Regeln reflektierende, nicht Regeln anwendende und verwertende Tätigkeit . . . Als derartig theoretisch vermittelte Reflexion auf Praxis kann Praktische Theologie wiederum auch als Theorie gelten." H. Luther, "Schleiermachers Verständnis des Verhältnisses von Theorie und Praxis nach den §§ 1 bis 19 der Glaubenslehre" (unpublished manuscript, n.p., 1971), p. 26; quotation taken from G. Otto, *Grundlegung der Praktischen Theologie* (Munich: Kaiser, 1986), p. 42.

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as an “application” was much lower than that of the philosophical and historical approaches as “pure academic disciplines” (*reine Wissenschaft*).

In the United States full emphasis was laid on the attitude and skill training of ministers. The focus was not on the unity of the discipline but on various fields of the official duties of ministers, extending into the backgrounds of those fields in the social sciences. Pastoral care, stewardship, preaching, and Christian education were taught with reference to psychology, sociology, general education, and communication theories. As a matter of fact, for a long time academic research in these fields was limited. In Europe it was restricted to theological backgrounds of ministerial practice, and in the United States to social studies. Meanwhile, however, particularly in Europe an important shift took place with regard to the inner direction of the discipline. Whereas formerly, practical theologians had first studied the Bible and the doctrine of the church in order to apply the results of their findings to the practice of the church, more recently, under the influence of social studies they have changed their approach: in recent decades practical theologians worldwide have agreed on starting their investigations *in practice itself*. Practical theology has become description of and reflection on the “self-understanding of a particular religious tradition.” This approach moves from practice to theory, then back to practice.<sup>4</sup>

Since practical theology has been accepted as an academic discipline that studies the practice of a religious tradition, the debate has focused on four principle issues: (a) The *field* of this discipline. Is it to address the work of the ordained ministry of the church? Or is the church itself (or the local congregation), as an instrument of the gospel in the world, the proper object of practical theological studies? Or should practical theology deal with the influence of the gospel (or even religion) in society? (b) The *academic status*. Does practical theology belong to the social sciences? Is it an action science or an empirical science? Or is it a normative theological discipline? In the last several years debate has been directed more and more at (c) the *methodology* of the discipline. Should the methods be taken from a quantitative conception or from qualitative and hermeneutical approaches of the social sciences? At this moment the discussion is particularly about (d) The *normative background* of practical theology. What does it mean that practical theology is a “theological” discipline? What is the significance of normative points of view and where are they coming from? In this article we will deal with these four issues in more detail.

<sup>4</sup> Don S. Browning, *A Fundamental Practical Theology: Descriptive and Strategic Proposals* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1991), pp. 5–6.

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## I. THE PRAXIS OF PRACTICAL THEOLOGY

To begin with, the expression “practical” theology is not the opposite of “theoretical” theology, but it stands for a theoretical or theological approach to practice. The first question we have to ask is, which practice is meant?

### *The Clerical Paradigm*

As pointed out in the first section, the traditional answer always has been that practical theology addresses the practice of church leaders and pastors. That is the way Schleiermacher and many others defined the “material object” of this discipline. For a long time the functions of the ordained ministers coincided with the subdisciplines of practical theology: spiritual leadership, preaching (homiletics), conducting services (liturgics), stewardship, Christian education, pastoral care, and so on. Since psychology, sociology, and communication theory in the social sciences had already developed a real academic status, practical theology used these disciplines as secondary disciplines (*Hilfswissenschaft*) that supported their own development. Pastoral care and Christian education were especially stimulated and enhanced by the development of psychology and life-cycle theories.

### *The Church Paradigm*

In the second half of the twentieth century, however, the emphasis in practical theology has been extended from the functions of the pastor to the functions of the church as a whole. Emphasis has been laid on (a) the *internal* functioning of congregations (church development and church vitalization, the division of power and the interaction between various institutions within the congregation, and pastoral care and communication) and (b) the *external* impact of the church (the mission of the church in witness, preaching, and education). And, of course, this approach includes the work of the ordained ministry as well! For many practical theologians, practical ecclesiology and church development have become the foundational subdisciplines of practical theology.

To cite a few proponents of this approach, O. Haendler was one of the first authors who situated his *Grundriß der praktischen Theologie* (1957) in the church. For him, practical theology is “*Strukturtheologie der gegenwärtigen Kirche*.” The international Roman Catholic *Manual of Pastoral Theology*<sup>5</sup> also took its position from the church as a whole. A. D. Müller in his

<sup>5</sup> F. X. Arnold ed., *Handbuch der Pastoraltheologie* (Freiburg, Basel, and Vienna: Herder, 1964–72).

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*Grundriß der praktischen Theologie* (1950) went a step further by dealing with the functions of the church from the perspective of the coming Kingdom of God, which is to be realized *in* the church and *by* the church. Also, Manfred Josuttis,<sup>6</sup> Rudolf Bohren,<sup>7</sup> and James Hopewell<sup>8</sup> took their starting point in ecclesiology.

As a matter of fact, at this moment the majority of academic practical theologians seem to consider "the functioning of the church in the perspective of the coming Kingdom of God in the world" as the actual field of practical theology. Don S. Browning began his book on practical theology<sup>9</sup> with the analysis of three congregations. James Fowler<sup>10</sup> elaborated the idea of "public church." Herbert Lindner<sup>11</sup> used the conception of network for his "congregation theory" (*Gemeindetheorie*), and Harald Schroeter<sup>12</sup> made important investigations into the phenomenon of the *Kirchentag* as a modern manifestation of the church in relation to the world.

### *The Liberation Paradigm*

At the same time a more critical approach to practical theology arose in Latin America. Latin American liberation theology understands itself as a form of practical theology.<sup>13</sup> Gustavo Gutierrez,<sup>14</sup> Clodovis Boff,<sup>15</sup> Juan Luis Segundo,<sup>16</sup> and others have made a strong plea for a fundamental change and liberation of society, to which practical theology should make a contribution. In Germany Gert Otto wrote a book in two volumes, called *Practical Theology*, on the impact of religion on society.<sup>17</sup> He particu-

<sup>6</sup> Manfred Josuttis, *Praxis des Evangeliums zwischen Politik und Religion* (Munich: Kaiser, 1980), *Der Pfarrer ist anders* (Munich: Kaiser, 1982), and *Der Traum des Theologen* (Munich: Kaiser, 1988).

<sup>7</sup> Rudolf Bohren, *Predigtlehre* (Munich: Kaiser, 1971), and *Daß Gott schön werde, Praktische Theologie als Theologische Ästhetik* (Munich: Kaiser, 1975).

<sup>8</sup> James F. Hopewell, *Congregation, Stories and Structures* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1987).

<sup>9</sup> See n. 4 above.

<sup>10</sup> James W. Fowler, *Weaving the New Creation: Stages of Faith and the Public Church* (San Francisco: Harper, 1991).

<sup>11</sup> Herbert Lindner, *Kirche am Ort: Eine Gemeindetheorie* (Stuttgart: Praktische Theologie Heute, 1994).

<sup>12</sup> Harald Schroeter, *Kirchentag als vorläufige Kirche: Der Kirchentag als eine besondere Gestalt des Christseins zwischen Kirche und Welt* (Stuttgart: Praktische Theologie Heute, 1993).

<sup>13</sup> See Rebecca S. Chopp, *The Praxis of Suffering: An Interpretation of Liberation and Political Theologies* (New York: Orbis, 1986); and B. Höfte, *Bekering en bevrijding* (Hilversum: Gooi en Sticht, 1990).

<sup>14</sup> Gustavo Gutiérrez, *A Theology of Liberation* (New York: Orbis, 1973).

<sup>15</sup> Clodovis Boff, *Teologia et prática: Teologia do político et suas mediações* (Petropolis, Brasil: Vozes, 1978).

<sup>16</sup> Juan Luis Segundo, *De la sociedad a la teología* (Buenos Aires: Lohlé, 1970).

<sup>17</sup> Gert Otto, *Praktische Theologie*, vol. 1, *Grundlegung der Praktischen Theologie* (Munich: Kaiser, 1986), and vol. 2, *Handlungsfelder der Praktischen Theologie* (Munich: Kaiser, 1988).

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larly addressed the field of tensions between the gospel, the church, and the broader society. His student Andreas von Heyl<sup>18</sup> wrote an important dissertation on the significance of the Frankfurt School for practical theology. G. Lämmermann also took a position from the viewpoint of critical theories.<sup>19</sup> In the Netherlands Rob van Kessel<sup>20</sup> has expressed the conviction that it is the primary mission and vocation of the church to serve society. And Riet Bons-Storm<sup>21</sup> thinks that practical theology has an important task in revealing sexual discrimination and other forms of oppression in church and society. In all these liberation approaches, the task of practical theology is critical and engaged not only in the functioning of the church but in the life of society as well.

### *The Individual Paradigm*

In recent years another movement in practical theology has also emerged, moving not from the clerical and church paradigm to the whole of society, but moving the other way around, in the direction of individual believers. Henning Luther, who passed away too early, wrote a challenging book on the theology of the "subject."<sup>22</sup> He asked for attention to the point of view of lay people (*Laientheologie*) who want to seek their own way in our complicated world full of confusing information. In the Netherlands Frits de Lange has tried to apply these insights within a theological project.<sup>23</sup> Especially in catechetics, homiletics, and pastoral care, the point of view of the learning individual, the hearer in the pew, and the person who seeks meaning for his life are stressed by Ernst Lange<sup>24</sup> (Germany), Gijsbert Dingemans<sup>25</sup> (the Netherlands), and Daniël Louw<sup>26</sup> (South Africa). In the Netherlands a new tendency is also forthcoming

<sup>18</sup> Andreas von Heyl, *Praktische Theologie und kritische Theorie: Impulse für eine praktisch-theologische Theoriebildung* (Stuttgart: Praktische Theologie Heute, 1994).

<sup>19</sup> G. Lämmermann, *Praktische Theologie als kritische oder als empirisch-funktionale Handlungstheorie?* (Munich: Kaiser, 1981).

<sup>20</sup> R. van Kessel, *Zes kruiken water* (Hilversum: Gooi en Sticht, 1989); German translation, *Gemeinde am Leben: Ein theologischer Durchblick für Praktiker* (Freiburg im Breisgau, 1990).

<sup>21</sup> R. Bons-Storm, *Pastoraat als bondgenootschap: Aanzet tot vernieuwing van de kerkelijke praktijk vanuit het vrouwenpastoraat* (Kampen: Kok, 1992). Compare Rebecca S. Chopp, *The Power to Speak: Feminism, Language, God* (New York: Crossroad, 1989).

<sup>22</sup> Henning Luther, *Religion und Alltag: Bausteine zu einer Praktischen Theologie des Subjekts* (Stuttgart: Radius Verlag, 1992).

<sup>23</sup> F. de Lange, *Ieder voor zich? Individualisering, ethiek en christelijk geloof* (Kampen: Kok, 1993).

<sup>24</sup> E. Lange, *Sprachschule für die Freiheit* (Munich: Kaiser, 1980), *Kirche für die Welt* (Munich: Kaiser, 1981), and *Predigen als Beruf* (Munich: Kaiser, 1982).

<sup>25</sup> G. D. J. Dingemans, *In de leerschool van het geloof* (Kampen: Kok, 1986), and *Als hoorder onder de hoorders* (Kampen: Kok, 1991).

<sup>26</sup> Daniël J. Louw, *Pastoraat als ontmoeting: Ontwerp vir n basisteorie antropologie, metode en terapie* (Pretoria: RGN, 1993).

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that calls for direct communication in practical theology with believers from the standpoint of semiotics.<sup>27</sup> We must wait for a further development of these probably fruitful ideas in the next several years.

The conclusion we may draw from this section is that the main emphasis in practical theology at this moment is on the internal and external functioning of the church, though some practical theologians lay an important accent on the liberating work of the gospel in society and in the life of individual believers.

### II. PRACTICAL THEOLOGY AS AN ACADEMIC DISCIPLINE

As was already mentioned above, in recent decades an important shift has taken place in practical theology, from the application of biblical data and statements of faith to the primary task of investigation of Christian practice itself. All over the world, practical theology is understood now as a science of action (*Handlungswissenschaft*) or as a social science. This shift was partially brought about by American authors such as A. T. Boisen,<sup>28</sup> S. Hiltner,<sup>29</sup> and Howard J. Clinebell, Jr.,<sup>30</sup> and their successors and, of course, by the general rise of the social sciences in the academic world. For reasons of clarity I suggest<sup>31</sup> distinguishing between three basic conceptions in the present discipline: “empirical-analytical,” “hermeneutical,” and “critical-political” approaches. But, I should add, at the moment efforts are being made by most practical theologians to combine the three.

#### *Practical Theology as an Empirical-Analytical Discipline*

Many practical theological scholars have made a choice for this model, one that is obviously derived from the social sciences. J. A. van der Ven, who understands practical theology in this way, calls it “*empirical theology*.”<sup>32</sup> The purpose of pastoral or practical theology is to inquire into the

<sup>27</sup> Wiel Claessens and Gérard van Tillo, *Van beneden naar boven* (Kampen: Kok, 1990); and Gérard van Tillo, *Onder tekens van macht en schijn* (Tilburg: Tilburg University Press, 1993). Compare Frits Beelen, “De vergeten gelovige” (Ph.D. diss., Tilburg University, 1993).

<sup>28</sup> Anton T. Boisen, *Problems in Religion and Life: A Manual for Pastors* (New York: Harper & Row, 1946).

<sup>29</sup> Seward Hiltner, *Religion and Health* (New York: Harper & Row, 1947), and *Pastoral Counseling* (New York: Harper & Row, 1949).

<sup>30</sup> Howard J. Clinebell, Jr., *Basic Types of Pastoral Counseling* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1966).

<sup>31</sup> In accordance with Johannes A. van der Ven and Hans-Georg Ziebertz, eds., *Paradigmenentwicklung in der Praktischen Theologie* (Kampen and Weinheim: Kok/Deutscher Studien Verlag, 1993).

<sup>32</sup> J. A. van der Ven, *Entwurf einer Empirischen Theologie* (Kampen: Kok, 1990); English translation, *Practical Theology: An Empirical Approach*, trans. Barbara Schultz (Kampen: Kok, 1993).



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experiences of salvation and of evil by humans in their personal and social life, in relation to what church and theology offer them. Van der Ven wants to know what people concretely believe and how their faith is or is not influenced by the teaching of the church. J. Firet makes a distinction between *descriptive* and *explanatory* sciences of action on the one hand (e.g., sociology and psychology) and *normative* sciences of action on the other hand (e.g., pedagogy and psychotherapeutics). Practical theology according to Firet tries to combine both aspects. It is a theological science of action.<sup>33</sup> In their research work most practical theologians will consider the faith and the convictions of the community they are working with as an inner perspective and as an *implicit* normativity (see Sec. IV, below), and they will sometimes compare this implicit normativity with other views.

In this way, practical theology gathers facts and knowledge that others can check and verify about religious practices. In Germany the first steps in the empirical approach to religious practice have been taken by H. D. Bastian,<sup>34</sup> H. Schröer,<sup>35</sup> Y. Spiegel,<sup>36</sup> Karl-Fritz Daiber,<sup>37</sup> and others. In the Netherlands the most striking example of an empirical-analytical approach is the work of the Nijmegen research group of J. A. van der Ven, while, in his recent manual for practical theology,<sup>38</sup> Gerben Heitink also makes a basic choice for an empirical approach.

### *Practical Theology as an Hermeneutical Enterprise*

There are, however, practical theologians who object to this strict empirical approach to the discipline because it mainly addresses the outward appearances of human action through questionnaires and quantitative methods. As a matter of fact, human acts are manifestations of thoughts, perceptions, interpretations, values, and assessments that lie “behind”

<sup>33</sup> Firet calls practical theology a theological or practical-theological discipline of action; see J. Firet, “De plaats van de praktische theologie binnen de theologische faculteit,” in *Spreeken als een leerling, Praktisch-theologische opstellen*, by J. Firet (Kampen: Kok, 1987), pp. 28–44.

<sup>34</sup> H. D. Bastian, “Vom Wort zu den Wörtern,” *Evangelische Theologie* 28 (1968): 25 ff., and *Theologie der Frage* (Munich: Kaiser, 1969).

<sup>35</sup> H. Schröer, “Theologia applicata,” *Pastoraltheologie* 53 (1964): 389–407, and “Forschungsmethoden in der Praktischen theologie,” in *Praktische Theologie Heute*, ed. F. Klostermann and R. Zerfuß (Munich: Kaiser, 1974), pp. 206ff.

<sup>36</sup> Y. Spiegel, “Sozialwissenschaftliche Forschungsmethoden in der praktischen Theologie,” in Klostermann and Zerfuß, eds., pp. 225–43.

<sup>37</sup> Karl Fritz Daiber, *Grundriß der praktischen Theologie als Handlungswissenschaft* (Munich: Kaiser, 1977).

<sup>38</sup> Gerben Heitink, *Praktische Theologie: Geschiedenis, theorie, handelingsvelden*, Handboek Praktische Theologie (Kampen: Kok, 1993).

the acts, and religion has to do with these background data, which empirical research is not able to reveal. Besides, these practical theologians think that the empirical approach does not pay sufficient attention to the historical backgrounds of churches and individual believers. Finally, they think that not only religious reality, but reality as such, can be opened up in a more appropriate way within the framework of language. For that reason they seek support from hermeneutical approaches; Ferdinand de Saussure, Roman Jakobson, and Umberto Eco are authors whom they consult, while Hans-Georg Gadamer and Paul Ricoeur are the philosophers on whom they rely. But some of them also use the work of the cultural anthropologists Clifford Geertz<sup>39</sup> and Victor Turner,<sup>40</sup> who understand social reality as a culture or network in which various institutions, acts, interpretations, traditions, customs, and human decisions are connected. They like to call their analysis of reality “thick description,” in contrast with the “thin” descriptions of empirical research, and they believe that they have found a better model to describe and to analyze religious reality.

As American examples of these approaches, the work of Robert Schreiter,<sup>41</sup> Charles Gerkin,<sup>42</sup> and James N. Poling and Donald E. Miller<sup>43</sup> may be mentioned, while the work of Don S. Browning<sup>44</sup> also is located within a hermeneutical framework with much openness to empirical methods. In the Netherlands practical theology in Groningen (Riet Bons-Storm, Albert K. Ploeger, and Gijsbert D. J. Dingemans) is hermeneutical, and in Germany Friedrich Schweitzer<sup>45</sup> pleads for a hermeneutical approach.

The hermeneutical approach does not usually provide a “sharp” picture of the religious reality, but it provides a drawing of the history and the background of churches and church members, and it gives insight into people’s values and norms. Moreover, it is open to more traditional methods and approaches in theology and is able to build bridges between biblical explanations and interpretations of the present reality.

<sup>39</sup> Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures* (New York: Basic, 1973).

<sup>40</sup> Victor Turner, *Dramas, Fields, and Metaphors: Symbolic Action in Human Society* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1974).

<sup>41</sup> Robert Schreiter, *Constructing Local Theologies* (New York: Orbis, 1985).

<sup>42</sup> Charles Gerkin, *The Living Human Document: Re-visioning Pastoral Counseling in a Hermeneutical Mode* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1984), and *Widening the Horizons: Pastoral Responses to a Fragmented Society* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1986).

<sup>43</sup> James N. Poling and Donald E. Miller, *Foundations for a Practical Theology of Ministry* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1985).

<sup>44</sup> See n. 4 above.

<sup>45</sup> Friedrich Schweitzer, “Praktische Theologie und Hermeneutik,” in van der Ven and Ziebertz, eds. (n. 31 above), pp. 19–48.

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### *Practical Theology as Liberation Theology*

In the previous sections, practical theology was described as an academic discipline, one that has gradually been accepted in the theological faculties. Liberation theology, however, was not here projected as an academic discipline, as it has risen either as a movement of people in the church of South America (*Iglesia popular*), or as a movement of black people in South Africa,<sup>46</sup> or as a movement of women internationally. Its starting point is the insight into one's own position as the oppressed, along with the experience that academic theories can be as oppressing as church decisions or measures taken by authorities. Gutiérrez, Boff, Jose Miguez Bonino, and others plead for the awakening and "conscientization" of the people and for development of independent theological reflection on their situation in order to achieve a just and righteous society. Therefore they look to critical analyses of society for support. The analysis of Marx played an important role in South America; feminists use postmodern philosophers such as Foucault, Lyotard, and Luce Irigaray; and "womanist" theologians<sup>47</sup> explore their own black culture. Meanwhile, liberation theologians in South America become more and more interested in discussions on theories of knowledge. In 1980, Boff called for a new understanding of the relation between theology and the social sciences,<sup>48</sup> and comparable things have been advocated by Segundo in his ideology-critical approach. In 1994 Leonardo Boff<sup>49</sup> presented a new theological approach called "eco-theology." These "liberation theologians" try to bring "experiences of the people" into relation with the official theological discourse. And women's studies all over the world try more or less successfully to penetrate the academic world.

### *Integration of Positions*

At this moment the positions are not as fixed as they seemed to be ten years ago. J. A. van der Ven, who has been intensely fighting for recognition of empirical methods in practical theology, has in his book on *Practical Theology*<sup>50</sup> put his research program into a hermeneutical framework. He thinks that qualitative methods are as useful and legitimate in practi-

<sup>46</sup> Frank Chicane, "Doing Theology in a Situation of Conflict," in *Resistance and Hope: South African Essays in Honour of Beyers Naudé*, ed. C. Villa-Vincencio and J. W. De Gruchy (Cape Town and Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1985), pp. 98–102.

<sup>47</sup> Alice Walker, *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens* (San Diego: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1983). Doreen Hazel, "Womanistische theologie en 'vrouwenkerk,'" in *Beweging in macht: Vrouwenkerk in Nederland?* ed. Riet Bons-Storm and Diana Vernooij (Kampen: Kok, 1991).

<sup>48</sup> See n. 15 above.

<sup>49</sup> Leonardo Boff, *Von der Würde der Erde: Ökologie, Politik, Mystik* (Düsseldorf, 1994).

<sup>50</sup> See n. 32 above.

cal theological research as are quantitative methods.<sup>51</sup> With Paul Ricoeur he states that explication and understanding are two dimensions of knowledge. The only restriction, however, is that both have to be verifiable by academic standards. Gerben Heitink<sup>52</sup> also stresses very strongly the complementary features of practical theology, bringing several approaches together in one design, while Hennie Pieterse, in his South African book on practical theology,<sup>53</sup> seeks to connect various points of view in Jürgen Habermas's theory of communicative action. Don S. Browning, coming more or less from a hermeneutical paradigm, also makes room for social empirical methods. Thus, today, *coalescence of approaches* and *complementarity of methods* are the key phrases in practical theology.

### III. ON METHODOLOGY

The most important debate in practical theology in recent years has been on methodology, and the most important word was *interdisciplinarity*. J. A. van der Ven makes the following distinctions as he describes the development of the discipline in the last several decades. Following the period of practical theology as "applied theology" or *monodisciplinarity*, in which the church or the ecclesial doctrines provided prescriptions for the practice of religious action, the *Handbuch der Pastoraltheologie*<sup>54</sup> opened the door to social sciences in the field of Roman Catholic pastoral theology. Van der Ven calls this approach *multidisciplinarity*. Social scientists were allowed to make their contributions, but theologians retained the right of the "last word" without real discussion. The third phase that van der Ven distinguishes is *interdisciplinarity*, with room for a real discussion between theology and social sciences. In a secularized society, however, social sciences do not really reckon with religion as part of social reality and social scientists are not interested in theological questions. For that reason van der Ven proposes a new type of relation, *intradisciplinarity*. Theologians have to learn the handwork of the social sciences themselves, based on their own questions and aims.<sup>55</sup> However, most practical theologians at this moment still try to cooperate with social scientists in an interdisciplinary way.

But what is the special methodology that practical theologians employ?

<sup>51</sup> J. A. van der Ven, "Die quantitative Inhaltsanalyse" and "Die qualitative Inhaltsanalyse" in van der Ven and Ziebertz, eds., pp. 69–164. Compare Chris Hermans, "Das religiös-kommunikative Handeln als Text; Ein empirisch-analytischer Ansatz der praktischen Theologie," in *ibid.*, pp. 165–200.

<sup>52</sup> See n. 38 above.

<sup>53</sup> Hennie Pieterse, *Praktiese teologie as Kommunikatiewe Handelings-teorie* (Pretoria: RGN, 1993).

<sup>54</sup> See n. 5 above.

<sup>55</sup> J. A. van der Ven, *Entwurf einer empirischen Theologie* (n. 32 above), pp. 104–19.

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If we try to summarize the ideas practical theologians agree on, we may state the following:

a) Since the shift from a more “Bible-oriented” practical theology to more “practice-directed” investigations, all practical theologians agree that research begins with an interdisciplinary *description* of the practice or *analysis* of the situation. The methods may be different, either more “empirical” (quantitative or qualitative), derived from social studies (J. A. van der Ven); or more “historical,” “linguistic,” and “hermeneutical,” issuing in a “thick description” (Don S. Browning); or more “ideology-critical,” analyzing the powers at work in church and society (liberation theology and feminist approaches). As we have already said, at present most practical theologians use these methods complementarily and try to work interdisciplinarily, but all agree that the first step should be the analysis of practice itself. For that analysis the input of various kinds of social studies (sociology, psychology, cultural anthropology, historical approach, ideology-criticism, and linguistic analysis) is necessary.

b) The next step after the initial description is to seek an *explanation* of the situation by drafting a hypothesis that can be verified (or falsified) afterwards and that will probably lead to new theories or new options. Practical theologians coming from the social studies will place more value on the formation of strictly verifiable *theories*. Practical theologians who work from a hermeneutical perspective will be satisfied with a *thick description* or a broad narrative that covers reality at large. Critical practical theologians will analyze and explain the social practice from the perspective of power, economy (Lämmermann, A. van Leeuwen, H. J. Tieleman), and/or sexual violence (Poling and Miller, Bons-Storm, Chopp).

c) After the analysis of the situation, practical theologians pass into the *normative* phase of their research. In most cases they will try to examine the praxis itself to find the normative backgrounds of a tradition or to examine the normative ideas of people.<sup>56</sup> Historical methods may be used, and research may be done in documents of the community or in the personal history of believers, but also people in the congregation or on the street may be interviewed. In this way an interpretation can be achieved of the “vision” (Browning), meanings, and values that conduct the actions of churches and believers. Practical theologians should have a critical awareness of interests that are involved and of their own theological and social preferences (Poling and Miller).

d) Finally, all practical theological work aims toward making suggestions and recommendations in order to *improve* and *transform* the existing practice. Browning calls this “strategic practical theology.” Practical theo-

<sup>56</sup> J. A. van der Ven, in his empirical approach, particularly inquires into the reception of theological ideas.

logians will make use of theories and methods of change as have been developed in pedagogy, therapeutics, and social development theories.<sup>57</sup> All recommendations have to be in agreement with the analysis of the situation (*a* and *b*), with the normative background (the “vision”) of the community or the believers (*c*), and with general ethical rules (Browning). Within the scope of these agreements there is a fundamental basis and reason for cooperation among practical theologians, and at the same time there is room left for differentiation in methods and goals.

#### IV. THE NORMATIVE BACKGROUNDS

Probably, to claim that all practical theologians agree with the shift from a “biblically oriented” view to a more “practice-directed” approach, as suggested above, was stepping too far. “Normativity” is an important issue at this moment in the practical theological debate and we shall now deal with it in more detail.

#### *Christopraxis*

Practical theology should always realize that the church has a mission of translating and transferring the gospel. Churches understand themselves as instruments of Christ in the world. In the 1950s that point of view was strongly emphasized in Europe by Karl Barth, in whose *Kirchliche Dogmatik* Christ constitutes the center of theology and of the church. The church has nothing to do but preach Jesus Christ. E. Thurneysen elaborated that purpose for the field of pastoral care in his well-known book in that field<sup>58</sup> and for the field of Christian education in a few articles. Pastoral care and catechetics are “*Ausrichtung des Wortes Gottes an den Einzelnen*” (an application of the Word of God to individuals”). Despite the knowledge of human resources provided by social studies, the working and the effect of the Word of God on mankind remains an inscrutable wonder of God, “an impossible possibility”! In the 1960s, however, G. Ebeling<sup>59</sup> related this “theology of the Word” to language theories that not only pay attention to the *meaning* of the Word but also to the *working* and the effect of the Word in the preaching, teaching, and acting of the

<sup>57</sup> Development theories are used in Chicago by Paul Dietterich, *Survey of Guided Development in Church Systems* (Chicago: Center of Parish Development, 1987), and *Strategic Planning in the Church* (Chicago: Center of Parish Development, 1987), and in Utrecht by A. J. Baart, *Theorievorming in, en concrete uitvoering van een multiple casestudy naar contractering in kerkelijk opbouwwerk en maatschappelijk activeringswerk* (Hertogenbosch: KLVMA-bericht, 1991).

<sup>58</sup> E. Thurneysen, *Die Lehre von der Seelsorge* (Zürich: Zollikon, 1946).

<sup>59</sup> G. Ebeling, *Wort und Glaube* (Tübingen: Mohr, 1967). See also H. J. C. Pieterse, *Skrifverstaan en prediking* (Pretoria: NG Kerkboekhandel, 1979).

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church. This proved to be a first step toward the application of social theories within practical theology.

Edmund Arens's 1992 book *Christopraxis*<sup>60</sup> undertook a new attempt to provide a foundation for a christological approach to the practice of the church, with the help of the communicative action theory of Jürgen Habermas. He interprets reality within a network of language. In the Jewish communicative praxis as well as in the praxis of Jesus, the message of the Reign of God (*Gottesherrschaft*) is the center of religion, as it creates a new view on reality. Jesus, indeed, evoked a new image of God's liberating presence that has been continued in a new communicative praxis of the disciples as witnesses of Christ. The church, as a "*christopraktische communio*," is an instrument and continuation of the authority of Christ in the world.

### *The Holy Spirit as Inspiring Power*

Since these "christological" approaches see the church and church leaders as direct "instruments" of Christ (i.e., as "Christopraxis"), there seems to be only a kind of one-way traffic. Christ speaks and acts through the church leaders, and there is little real possibility for a reply or dialogue by church members. This bestows tremendous power on the clergy. Nor is there any room for the practical reason of social sciences. For that reason some European theologians have attempted to understand the church and do practical theology on the basis of a *pneumatological* foundation. Of course Christ is the founder of the church, but the work of the church is inspired and conducted by the Holy Spirit, who enlists and uses human resources.

Dutch theologians in particular, such as A. A. van Ruler<sup>61</sup> and J. J. Rebel,<sup>62</sup> have, in reference to Calvin, paid attention to the advantage of the pneumatological angle in ecclesiology to make room for human cooperation and human resources. The German practical theologian Rudolf Bohren<sup>63</sup> adopted in his *Predigtlehre*, and later in his book *Daß Gott schön werde*, the idea of "theonome reciprocity" from van Ruler. That means that humans are afforded their own place as partners in the covenant with God. Members of the congregation, having received the gifts of the Holy Spirit, constitute a gifted congregation (*begabte Gemeinde*), and bring forth their own contributions and charismata, rather than being absolutely dependent on the "christopraxis" of the clergy. These approaches

<sup>60</sup> Edmund Arens, *Christopraxis: Grundzüge theologischer Handlungstheorie* (Freiburg, Basel, and Vienna: Herder, 1992).

<sup>61</sup> See A. A. van Ruler, *Theologisch Werk* (Nijkerk: Callenbach, 1969), 1:175 ff., and 6:9 ff.

<sup>62</sup> J. J. Rebel, *Pastoraat in pneumatologisch perspectief* (Kampen: Kok, 1981).

<sup>63</sup> See n. 7 above.

were important intermediates in the shift in practical theology from a christological point of view to the idea of inquiry into the pneumatic practice of the church, in which the fruits of the Holy Spirit can be found.

### *Layers of Normativity*

Since practical theologians began their investigations of practice itself, they have discovered that there is not only a “theological” normativity (as “fruits of the Spirit”) *behind* the practice, but also the level of rules and needs of life *in* the practice. K. A. Schippers, who carried out a large research program among inhabitants from various countries, cultures, and religions in the old city of Rotterdam, tried to bring together the needs and problems of immigrant and native Dutch people and the message of the gospel in a theological program.<sup>64</sup> In his view, since the Kingdom of God is the counterpart of the situation, the needs, and the problems of the inhabitants of Rotterdam City and since the Kingdom of God, represented by the power of the resurrection of Jesus, is actually present in our world as yeast and at work through the Holy Spirit, human conflicts are to be exposed, tackled, and reconciled. This provides needy people with hope, for the signs of the working presence of the Spirit are to be found within our reality, and calls for a program of liberation from dependence and racism and for the building of a society, in which all groups of the multicultural and multiracial society are invited to bear responsibility and make a contribution from their own backgrounds.

In a more systematic and fundamental way, this idea has been elaborated by the American practical theologian Don S. Browning in his rich book, *A Fundamental Practical Theology*.<sup>65</sup> He identifies five dimensions of normativity as five levels in “practical reason”: (1) the *visional level*, which constitutes the envelope of practical reason and defines the worldview of religious communities; (2) the *obligational level* of moral obligations; (3) theories of premoral good at the *tendency-need level*; (4) the *environmental-social level*, as they are described by social sciences; and finally, (5) the *rules and roles of life*. He brings them together in the concept of *phronēsis* (practical reason), with strong emphasis on the ethical dimension of “mutuality” and “brotherhood/sisterhood.” The inner core to practical reason for practical theology is to be found in the love commandment of Matt. 19:19, but practical reason also has a narrative envelope, which is not necessarily specifically Christian. Religious narratives and metaphors can function to enliven, energize, liberate, and make more effective the workings of practical reason.

<sup>64</sup> K. A. Schippers et al., *Kerkelijke presentie in een oude stadswijk* (Kampen: Kok, 1990).

<sup>65</sup> See n. 4 above.



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For the “narrative vision of the church” Browning sometimes uses the inspiring metaphor of the “memory” of the church, while Joseph C. Hough, Jr., and John B. Cobb, Jr.,<sup>66</sup> similarly speak of the “internal history” or memory by which Christians live individually and corporately. In this internal history or memory the narratives of the past (the “tradition” as implicit normativity), but also the experiences, whether good or bad, of persons and communities (that is, the “history” in which the tradition has been working), are assembled and carried through time. Part of this memory is open and public, and part of it is hidden, “subconscious” or even “unconscious”. In church revitalization programs Christian communities are confronted with their past (tradition and history, both conscious and unconscious) to find new ways of interpreting the past and opening up the future. In personal counseling as well, the memory of individuals may be addressed. Charles Gerkin<sup>67</sup> speaks of “widening the horizons”: Each person has his or her own history of life that is embedded in a framework of stories and narratives, which in turn are nourished by the social and cultural context and also by interpretations of traditional narratives, the grand stories of ideologies or the myths, stories, and confessions of religions. For Gerkin, hermeneutics is a way to “widen the horizon” of persons and communities and to bring them into contact with the normative ground of their original stories and myths in a new process of interpretation. Normativity is a complex phenomenon that churches and individuals carry with them as their “memory,” not in the form of a ready-made model but through a process of interpretation.

The shift in approaches to practical theology had radical consequences for the normative realm. From applied biblical and doctrinal approaches in practical theology, attention has moved on the one hand to the general idea of practical reason, as put forward by Aristotle and many others, though nourished by a narrative envelope (Browning). On the other hand, normativity seems to involve an appeal to the memory (normative tradition and history) of persons and communities (Hough and Cobb) and to new interpretations of the past (Gerkin). In this approach it is possible to take an empirical (van der Ven) or hermeneutical (Gerkin) approach to the resources of Christian (and other) communities and persons. In both cases practical theology may be viewed as an academic discipline that meets modern university standards.

<sup>66</sup> Joseph C. Hough, Jr., and John B. Cobb, Jr., *Christian Identity and Theological Education* (Chico, Calif.: Scholars Press, 1985), p. 50.

<sup>67</sup> See n. 42 above.